

NEPTA MEETING: MARCH 23, 2009

Submitted by Linda Vieira

Piano Music of Franz Josef Haydn, Charles Griffes and music inspired by birds for “If I Were A Bird” CD by Michael Lewin

Michael Lewin is a teacher at Boston Conservatory and maintains an international concert career.

FRANZ JOSEPH HAYDN

Mr. Lewin gave a summary of Haydn's life before talking about his music. Haydn left his parent's home at age six because they could not provide him with the musical education his talent warranted. He played the harpsichord and violin and was also a singer. Haydn taught Beethoven but Beethoven thought that Haydn wanted to put too many rules on him.

At the Esterhazy estate, he could have been considered a glorified servant but he was highly esteemed in his post. During his thirty years at the estate in Hungary, he did miss Vienna but as a result of being isolated, he was creative and not influenced by the music of others. An orchestra was available to him all the time so his piano music tends to be orchestral.

There is controversy about how many piano sonatas Haydn wrote. The number varies from 52 to 62 because some were not finished and it is not certain if some were written by Haydn. They can be divided into 3 periods. The first 19 are considered early sonatas that are Baroque in style with a tendency towards polyphony. They were written for the harpsichord. His middle sonatas, such as the ones in A flat and F, were written for the fortepiano. The last 6 to 9 sonatas, his late sonatas, were written for the piano. Haydn saw the development of the piano in his lifetime.

Ten to twelve of Haydn's sonatas are considered masterpieces. Mr. Lewin recommended the following sonatas: G minor (2 movements), C sharp minor, C minor, E minor, and B minor.

The so called “chicken” sonata is a good first classical sonata for a spirited child due to its wit and humor, especially in the 3rd movement. He does not recommend Sonata in E flat for conservatory auditions.

The sonatas by Haydn allow the performer freedom in many areas such as ornamentation, touch, dynamics, pedal, tempo, repeats and interpretation. Mr. Lewin thinks that all the sonatas sound good on the piano and none of them sounds good on the harpsichord. He performed the F major sonata which is a good teaching piece and typical of Haydn.

Haydn wrote lots of concertos that are wonderful teaching pieces with D major being the most popular. He also wrote variations and fantasies. Mr. Lewin played the F minor variations, which are often called Andante and Variations. This piece is a late work that many consider to be his greatest work and the greatest set of classical variations written. As a double variation, it is emotional and symphonic with a dramatic section similar to an improvised cadenza.

CHARLES GRIFFES

Charles Griffes (1884- 1920) studied in Berlin at age 18 because Europe was considered the place to study music at that time. He moved back to New York for the last 12 to 13 years of his life and his music became more adventurous with irregular phrase lengths and an abandonment of tonality. His music was transformed during these years and in Donna Anderson's biography, she called him “an American Impressionist. He wrote a piano sonata in 1919 which is considered one of the great American piano sonatas. There are 3 movements, all connected. Mr. Lewin performed this piece and said it is audience friendly and a good competition piece.

Mr. Lewin also performed the following pieces by Griffes.

Scherzo from Fantasy Piece Op. 6 is a wild and virtuostic piece which is good for a 16 year old with its infectious rhythms.

“Lake at Evening” from 3 Tone Picture Op.5 is the simpliest and good for a young student with imagination who can reach an octave.

Griffes music is published by Schirmer and Mr. Lewin has recorded all of his music on 2 CDs. Many of his piano pieces were also orchestrated.

MUSIC INSPIRED BY BIRDS

A pianist needs a gigantic repertoire to have a performing career. However, recording companies want pianists who will record something they don't already have in their catalogue. Mr Lewin gave out a copy of music to be included in his upcoming CD “If I Were a Bird” which is a selection of bird themed pieces by 19 varied composers. He played a beautiful Romantic piece “The Two Larks” by Leschetitzky and “If I Were a Bird Op. 2 No. 6” by Adolf Henslet which is a study in double notes.

Mr. Lewin can be reached at lewinpiano@gmail.com